



The Eyes of Terror

A Story of an American Soldier in the Cuban Jungle

By Roy E. Norton



BARTH disappeared after the battle of San Juan Hill. He was posted as missing, as his body was not found among those who either twisted into silence or were carried moaning to the hospital tents after that day's interlocking with the Spaniards.

Barth had been anything but an old man when he enlisted; yet he had none of the lightness of youth. He was always taciturn, always waiting. That, at least, was the impression he made on his colonel, who developed an unusual interest in him. Waiting—yes, that was the word, just waiting. Otherwise Barth revealed nothing. No man knew his story, and none his real method in life. All anyone knew was that he was a soldier to make the heart glad, one to lighten the day's work by the mere watching of his soldierly perfection.

The last time the colonel or any of his fellows saw him was in the final charge at San Juan, when our men, with the goodly light of the fight in their eyes, and with dust and grime on their faces, went irresistibly upward. It was a new Barth they saw pass that day, not the one with the quiet face. A man transformed loped forward as if drunk with blood-lust and parched for one more draught of the battle's wine—a man whose

turned-back hat-brim exposed a sweat-stained visage, and whose splendid muscles carried him with lithe, tiger-like springs. So he vanished.

Soon after the war the colonel was retired, by reason of his age, which was a sore trial to him. It is not pleasant to be set aside while yet you feel that, although your hair is gray, the blood and fire of earlier years are still in you. In the case of the colonel, the wanderings of all the years ago were as nothing compared with those that came when he no longer listened to the bugle-calls. Then, finally, this *Wanderlust* took him back to Cuba, and drove him far into the interior, restlessly roving. That roving led him into the Sierra de Maestra, which piles up along the coast-line a formidable rampart of green, and shuts out all view of the sunny land. And there the colonel found an end to the mystery of Sergeant Barth.

The colonel was riding, saddle-worn and careless, through the forest glades, urging his miserable mount forward with spur and whip, in the hope that he might come upon some place offering a night's rest, when he heard a voice in the jungle, and peering through the tangle in the direction whence it came discovered a tiny bridle-path leading off from the main trail. Naturally, he took it. He followed it into a little clearing that looked as if it had been dipped out from that sea of green by a gigantic hand; and

there he came plump against a cabin. In the door stood a man, cool, watchful, with no sign of either surprise or welcome. Then the colonel, as he went forward, saw that, despite the man's apparent carelessness, one hand was resting gently; but with a steady grip, on a huge army Colt's strapped to his hips. The man was Barth.

Not until the colonel recognized him and walked up with extended hand, did Barth give any sign of recognition. Then, as quietly as of old, he asked,

"Colonel, are you my friend?"

The old barrier between superior officer and non-com. was down, and the sergeant knew it by the way the colonel shook his hand.

"Barth, I'm glad to see you again," was the veteran's greeting.

"I have but one request," Barth rejoined; "that of a host who takes advantage of his position and begs you to say nothing of the past. To-night we can talk—not now."

Ever in the colonel's memory lingers a picture of that encircling jungle, which grew thick and rank around the cabin, spreading a shade of trees, a tangle of vines, and a blanket of creepers over dead men's bones—jungle where his horse had stumbled over bared skulls, the last somber relics in a country so infested and overridden by twenty years of war that the buzzards still hover in the skies from force of habit. That was the kind of jungle which halted around Barth's clearing, lying in wait to creep in stealthily, and there, too, bring obliteration. But another picture was indelibly impressed on the colonel that night by the entrance of a beautiful young Spanish woman, whose eyes, as she came in, touched those of Barth with a caress of adoration.

The dinner by candlelight was good, very good indeed to a man whose stomach rebelled against the everlasting sameness of Cuban cooking. And through it all Barth sat with a look of gloom in his eyes that told the woman that the stranger had brought nothing but trouble, and was a part of the curtain of mystery through which her love had never pierced. Prescience must have guided that girl-woman, for when after the meal Barth told her she had better go to bed, she looked shyly at the colonel, and then, as though casting him out, twined her arms around Barth's neck and

looked long and steadily into his eyes, before saying to the stranger a formal "*Buenos noches, Señor.*"

It was in the tropical gloom, lighted only by stars, with fireflies weaving a fantastic atmospheric dance to night-birds' singing, that Barth told his story. The tale was punctuated with long pauses, when neither of the men spoke, and only the fitful fire of their pipes showed that here were two together. Barth's pipe went out as the story progressed, and the stem of the colonel's was bitten in two.

There is nothing much harder than to hear a game man, one who has pride in himself and his work, tell you of cowardice such as was his; particularly when the listener knows that the man is telling all this in order to explain—not palliate, he made no attempt at that—his desertion from a corps and a life of which he was proud. Barth gave the story, he said, because he wanted his officer's respect. By his own account, he had been well educated at the time when his boyish life became interwoven with that of the great frontier. Of course the blood pulsed hotly from his heart; otherwise he would not have sought the freedom of such an existence.

Barth early gained the reputation of being a game man, but at the same time one whose fearless determination was always for fair play. It was this that made him, at but three-and-twenty years of age, the sheriff of one of the biggest and roughest among the turbulent border counties. As sheriff he was a success and gained reputation. But into his territory there came one day the remnants of a band of outlaws who had terrorized their way from Cheyenne to Dodge, robbed trains and banks indiscriminately from Coffeyville to Corazon, and finally come to grief.

Barth was notified that two men on whose heads was set a price had taken refuge in the hills, and he decided to "go and get them." In his narrative, Barth insisted that it was in no spirit of bravado that he undertook the task single-handed, but rather because he expected only a peaceable surrender. It is likely, however, that he gave no thought to this feature of the affair, but went unattended because he was absolutely without fear. It was nearly dusk when he reached the outlaws' cabin, and he had dismounted and was standing in the door before they discovered his presence.



A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG SPANISH WOMAN, WHOSE EYES TOUCHED THOSE OF BARTH
WITH A CARESS OF ADORATION

Either because they were off their guard or because they did not know him, there was no disturbance when he entered, and no demonstration when he told them they were under arrest. And then Barth saw, to his amazement, that they were accompanied by a young woman. In her eyes blazed a fury toward him as an officer that at once led him to feel less confident of an amicable termination of his mission.

How it started he never could tell, but there was a spring, a flash, and a report, and Barth dropped to the floor with a bullet through his left shoulder. But as he went down he instinctively seized his gun, and his first shot in the turmoil brought down his assailant. Then, through the smoke of the room, shots flashed to and fro until Barth made for the open door, through which one man and the woman plunged ahead of him. What followed was not pleasant to hear.

Barth's accounting was that he was mad with rage and pain; that when he stepped from the door the remaining outlaw fired and missed; that the woman had a gun pointed at him, and that he blindly shot, first at her and then at the man. Both shots were fatal; and before he could realize what he had done, he saw the woman, done to death and with blood gushing in a torrent from a throat-wound, crawl over to the body of the outlaw, on which she fell.

"God knows, I didn't want to kill her," Barth said, in heart-hurt tones; "but I had run amuck with fighting fever, until streaks and bars of lurid red shot and shimmered before my eyes like the scarlet blaze of a fire-dancer's swirling skirts. I ran over to her and tried vainly to stanch the spurting flow of blood from her wound, but she died as I held her—died with a look that no man could ever forget, a look that carried neither pain nor regret, but rather a soul's threat.

"Colonel," he said, after a moment's silent struggle with his emotions, "I felt afraid even as I gathered up and tenderly straightened for the long sleep the body of the woman whom I had sent out; felt afraid as I smoothed back the tangled hair and tried to close and shut out the sight of those staring eyes—eyes that even through death's glaze looked at me with accusing fearlessness. There was something in them beyond my fathoming, as if at the last she had striven to stay and fight me still longer; as if, with life itself leaping to free-

dom through her wound, her one regret had been that she could not beg from death one blow to render me. I wish she had! I wish her desire could have been gratified!

"Of course the coroner's jury not only exonerated me for killing the woman, but I was lauded for killing the last of the Dierks gang, and was offered the reward. I couldn't take it, and shuddered when I returned it. But those were busy days for a sheriff in that county, what with a horse-thief to pick up here and there, and a thousand and one little things to attend to; so as time passed I forgot it all.

"Then came a night when I was hurriedly called down to Al Swift's saloon and dance-hall—a tough dive—where Big Bell, a notorious gun-man from over the border, had run everybody out and taken possession. He was pot-shotting the glassware when I arrived. I didn't have much fear of not being able to land him all right, so walked right in under the blanket of smoke that hung like a cloud above his head. I took no chances, but had the drop on my man as I jumped in; and then, even as I held my gun on him—I swear to you it's true—I saw peering over his shoulder the face of the woman I had killed the year before—saw her direful eyes fixed on mine, saw her lips curl into a triumphant smile, and I knew that I was weakening.

"How can I tell you of what happened! How can I sit here and tell you, Colonel, who used to respect me, that I stood still while Big Bell, a braggart, in front of the crowd that had followed me, walked deliberately over, wrested my gun from my unresisting, nerveless hand, threw it back of him on the floor, and then, as I stood mute and palsied with fear, spat in my face and threw me out of the saloon. And I, who had never been afraid of anything on earth, cried like a baby as a man led me from the gibing, taunting crowd to my room, where I might sob the night away and write my resignation from office.

"There is commiseration for the man who tries hard and fails, and sorrow for the man who gamely fights and falls; but for a coward nothing but pitiless comment and open jeer. That is the way of the West—my West, the one I knew and reveled in and loved as a man loves his sweetheart. Looming always before me was the certainty that never again could I look into the face of any man who had known me, without searching

into his eyes for the flicker of contempt that would never be found wanting. So in that gray hour when the slow dawn crept up over hills that stared blackly at me, when the dance-halls were all quiet and the click of the roulette wheels stilled, I saddled the only friend that did not know of my disgrace and rode away—rode like hell to escape memory—a hopeless and never-ending race.

"Then came years of cow-punching. Black years those, when for the first time in my life I drank and drifted, shot and shouted, and drained only the dregs of life without regret. And I made new friends, such as they were.

"Colonel, the next time she came to me was when the thudding hoofs of thousands of stampeding steers shook the ground behind me, as I vainly tried to head them. Up from the ground she came in the stormy night, with that same calm, menacing look in her eyes, and as she flashed past me into the gloom and the lightning's glare, back over that wildly tossing sea of glistening horns, fear gripped me by the heart until no steer in all that panic-stricken, frenzied band was more terror-mad than I. And as I swung out, deserting my duty, ripping my horse with cruel spurs that bit deep, and shredding his hide with insane strokes of a merciless quirt, I went through all the agony that I would have felt had the pointed hoofs of the herd been actually battering and churning me into a shapeless pulp beneath the lumbering bodies.

"I'm not sure that anyone else understood; but I knew. That was enough. So I rode for days until I came to the post. By this time terror had settled on me, and it was with a determination to whip either death or cowardice that I came to the Eighteenth. You know I was a good soldier, and that you yourself complimented me for bravery in that little affair down in the Tetons, and—and——"

The colonel felt the vibrant undertone of appeal in his voice, and answered,

"Barth, you were a good and a brave soldier."

Apparently somewhat encouraged, the man resumed his story.

"Only God and you and that woman know the fight I made. Only you three know that I spurred myself into all sorts of danger and all kinds of trials, in the hope that I would meet her again and that when

I did I could conquer terror and again look my fellows in the face, knowing that when tried I should not be found wanting. The little things and little deeds came and went, and in those eight years I gained the good-will and, if I may be permitted to guess, the admiration of at least some members of the Eighteenth. But there was no grave test. In all that time I was a man at feud with himself.

"San Juan's early hours found me crying for the supreme trial. I fought, I met death; yet the woman came not. In a delirium of exultation over what I considered my liberation, I led the last charge, the one man perhaps who went up the lead-swept hill with a song of battle in his heart because he believed that his greatest fight had been won, and was elated that a thing greater than death, his own soul's cowardice, had been mastered. I charged like a drunken man, and surprised myself by singing, in a voice that seemed not my own, but rather the joyous call of one in ecstasy. I cheered the others on with a laugh, and felt as a boy playing some game and playing it to win. I ran lightly that I might be the first to meet the foe. I felt my fingers clench and unclench in the mad desire to come to a primitive man's conflict with the enemy, that I might have something tangible to seize and rend to overcoming.

"A gun before me belched forth, I heard the scream of flying missiles, and then she came—came in the smoke wreaths with all her terror, and as she looked into my eyes again I felt the cringing of cowardice. I tried to fight it off. The sweat on me grew cold, and with a trembling hand I emptied my revolver to where she hovered above me, threw it as an emptied piece of steel at her mocking face, and with one furious lunge rushed forward, hoping that I could grasp and tear her from the heart of the cloud that bore her. I clutched wildly at nothing, stumbled and fell upon my face and seized with sinewy grip the kindly grass and twisted it round and round my fingers, obsessed with shuddering fear and the awful knowledge that if I lost my hold I should take to flight.

"I felt my soul riven, riven and fluttering in that awful fight for moral courage, and as I pantingly struggled on I heard a cracked and tense-strung voice—not my own—crying through my bitten lips to God for help and mercy; heard it piteously plead

that I, John Barth, should not lose this last supreme fight with fear. It seemed that the very wind turned a tornado which shrieked and shrilled above me, and that bursts of demoniacal laughter rang in my ears. I felt the cold grip of her hands on my wrists, and felt the grass breaking, blade by blade, and with each parting knew that my heart and courage were failing and that when the last withe snapped I would no longer be able to hold myself. My bleeding fingers sought fresh anchorage, the turf tore loose from the roots, I was fairly lifted into the air and on my feet, and then, vanquished, with her laughter driving me on, I fled.

"Fled—I know not which way. It may be that I went toward the enemy and over him. I carried four wounds of which I knew nothing. I ran until my staring eyes lost sight, until my nerves lost feeling and my harried heart beat in my ears like the boom of an Indian war-drum. Through patches of jungle, across streams, and up mountainsides I made my way blindly, and always when I paused I felt back of me a presence worse than death stretching forth gaunt fingers to pull me down, or heard that cackling laugh taunting me with my overwhelming cowardice. My legs were great weights which stiffly threw me, and each time as I fell and would lift my face she would rise up before me. The dark recesses of the forests held her, and as I crossed the streams she stared at me with satirical contempt from the waters.

"I don't know how long the race lasted. As it neared its close, I remember automatically counting the dull pad of my feet as I ran across smooth places, and of thinking that the veins in my forehead had burst and were smearing my face with blood. I remember wondering why I did not bleed to death and wishing that I might, so that I could meet her on her own ground and beg her to let me rest.

"When I awoke it was to find myself a living skeleton, white-haired and convalescent from a fever. It was the girl you saw inside who pressed a cup of water to my lips and who has since been all of life to me. She alone of all the world does not believe me a poltroon. When night comes, and I sleep with a candle by my head to hold away the shadows, she alone has power to drive away that face. I am better buried in this place where no test of courage may

come, buried alive where none may see me other than the girl who does not understand. You alone know my secret, and you——"

"Will keep it, Barth," the colonel interrupted softly.

It was long before the colonel went to sleep that night. The picture of a really brave man's misery so overwhelmed him that when consciousness at last gave way it was but to dream it all over again. Then suddenly from an adjoining room came a succession of agonized, heart-rending screams. The colonel sprang from his cot and rushed to the frail door, which he fairly tore from its hinges. And there, her face showing pallid in the candlelight, with outstretched hands, and walking backward, was the Spanish girl. And following her, with stealthy step, heeding not her sobbing cries for mercy, but muttering unintelligibly in an insane frenzy, was Barth, his white hair bristling, his head sunk between the quivering muscles of his shoulders, his attitude a picture of deadly ferocity gathered to launch itself forward on its victim—Barth, whose unquenchable gameness was struggling with his cowardice and driving his writhing, shrinking body on again to give battle that, he knew, must end in defeat, with a power he did not understand. A man pitted against a vengeful apparition!

Even as the colonel stood motionless, stunned by the horror of the scene, a revolver flashed in Barth's upraised hand, and his voice came, loud, maniacal, raucous with hate and triumph,

"I've got you—at last!"

But in that moment of deadly crisis, ere yet his finger pressed the trigger which it touched, the love in the girl's face, which remained even in the peril of death at his hands, grew and shone. And its radiance pierced and rent the veil of illusion that hung over Barth's senses, so that now, before the colonel could spring on him, the glare died from his eyes, the revolver crashed to the floor, his arms strained the girl to his breast.

Barth turned as the colonel approached. "Her love has conquered that other's hate," he said, with tender reverence.

But the colonel, as he rode away in the morning through the dark gloom of the skull-strewn jungle, questioned sadly of the silence,

"Which will conquer next time, this new love, or that old hate which has harried him through all the years?"